

Australia: Brisbane workers and youth denounce austerity budget

Our correspondents
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World Socialist Web Site supporters spoke to workers and young people in Brisbane's Queen Street Mall last Saturday about the slashing of jobs and services by the Queensland state government, and the efforts of the Labor and trade union leaders to argue that the way to fight the cuts was to vote Labor at the next federal and state elections. Several reflected bitterly on the experiences of previous Labor governments, including that of former Premier Anna Bligh in Queensland.

Anaie, a university naturopathy student, and part-time retail worker, said: "The budget cuts are very stressful. It's very sad watching your friends lose their jobs or their future prospects, and all their families going through it as well."

"Someone who's worked all their life for the government, what are they going to do? They're not going to be able to find another job like that, yet they have families and mortgages to pay."

"My friend, who's a court stenographer, just got told she has six months to look for another job. She had just moved out of home and signed a new lease. They all got told that they would not be sacked, but six months later, they are. There won't be any jobs by the time I'm out of uni."

Anaie did not believe that the Labor Party provided any alternative, and was disenchanted with the political system. "I think there has to be a whole overhaul of society," she commented. "It is not working, pretty much. It doesn't really matter who you vote for. If you vote for someone like [Queensland premier] Campbell Newman, who says he won't cut jobs, then it happens anyway. To my generation, it feels like there's not any

point in voting, because it makes no difference."

Asked about Prime Minister Julia Gillard's claim that the cuts showed the necessity to return her federal Labor government at the next election, Anaie retorted: "Vote Labor to oppose the cuts? I don't believe her. Like I said, it makes no difference. That's why a lot of people refuse to vote, rather than vote for someone who will just be the same."

Oscar, a young worker, was looking for a job in the mining industry. He had just moved to Brisbane from the Gold Coast, where he had been working at a casino "but that slowed down dramatically as well, with jobs going, and all that."

Now, with hundreds of jobs being eliminated in the mining industry, "the prospects look bleak—I've had to sign up with a labour-hire company in the hope of getting some work. China is now getting coal from Mongolia and Africa, where it is cheaper."

Oscar commented: "I've heard about these budget cuts, and I don't like it. But I don't think that Labor is any alternative. I'm not happy with either party at the moment."

Geoff, a Main Roads worker, said: "Main Roads is being restructured and the government is getting rid of so many of us. I believe that by next June, they will sack the rest of us. At my depot, 12 have gone already, out of 30."

Geoff said that with the mining boom on the way out, Premier Newman was carrying on from where Labor Premier Bligh had left off, with privatisations and job

destruction. “Labor’s got to do a lot better than they have been doing,” he said.

Peter, a former Queensland Health worker, had experienced similar “restructuring” in New Zealand, where health services had been outsourced to private contractors.

“Everybody was hoping that by getting rid of Bligh, we would get things on the right track,” he said. “But by slashing so many jobs, this will just make it much worse. People will panic and put their wallets away, and the suffering will be greater.”

Peter explained: “My partner still works for Queensland Health, in primary care. Newman just fired 400 dieticians. Did you hear about it in the media? Nothing. People will be paying a price for this for years, as preventative services, designed to keep people out of hospitals, are removed. Bio-medical services are going as well.

“They’ll contract out all the auxiliary services, saying it is better value for money. They’ll get it cheaper, but you’ll get less service, it’s as simple as that. There are way more than 4,100 jobs going in health. They’ll use district health boards to make the cuts, like with the 45 nurses being cut in Townsville, and then say, we didn’t do that. That’s so-called autonomy.”

Reflecting on the underlying issues, Peter said: “The fundamental issue here is: is the world here for business, or is it here for people? We may have to run it like a business, but it should be people first. Coming into power and saying 20,000 people have to go is not humane. This is the trouble with the Western world. We have two parties that are essentially the same, whether it be Republican and Democrat, or Labor and Liberal.”

Asked whether he would support a socialist alternative, he commented: “Up until 1979, capitalism still trickled down its wealth, but since then it has broken down. The people at the top decided they wanted everything for themselves. Under true capitalism, I have a baseball bat. I hit you over the head

and rob you. With a \$10 bat, I get \$100. That’s a good rate of return! Without any moral values, that’s true capitalism. The strongest wins.”

Peter rejected Gillard’s suggestion that voting Labor would protect jobs and services. “I don’t believe that; they’re all controlled by the financial markets. Even if the Liberals are a little harsher, you’ll get the same thing with Labor. I was in New Zealand in the 1980s when the Employment Contracts Act came in with the Lange-Douglas Labour government. Unions were smashed by a Labour government. It was the same as Hawke and Keating here in Australia.”

Matt, who works in the publishing industry, and whose partner is in the Queensland public sector, was most concerned about the impact of the cuts on public services. “The cuts will be particularly felt by the community, especially outside Brisbane. To sack 14,000 people is a tremendous blow.”

Matt added: “Within the public service, it’s the people at the bottom of the echelon—the people in grades 3, 4, 5 and 6—that are going to feel the boot of the Campbell government, not the senior management.”

Like others, Matt had no faith in the Labor Party. “Australia needs a new direction that moves away from the two major parties,” he said. “A protest vote can be a wake-up call for the major parties in the first instance, but there’s no real alternative to Labor at the moment.”

The author also recommends:

Devastating cuts to Queensland public sector jobs and services

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